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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

It is the purpose of this paper to reflect on the principal's role in the following areas: (a) creating a safe, caring environment for students; (b) assisting teachers in 2 creating a learning environment; (c) engaging parents in their child's education; and (d) developing a learning community as an educational leader. It is my intent to examine the characteristics of these roles through my philosophy and educational experiences thus envisioning an environment that will ensure these efforts.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa**

In Partial Fulfillment

**of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education**

by

Diana Bobo-Campbell

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My motivation to learn began as a child during the 60's and 70's. During this time, history-making events were happening around the country. Camelot was in the White House, men were drafted by a lottery, and the "Little Rock Nine" were integrated into America's education system. These events changed the world and the education system that had been "deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation" (Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg, 1971).

The impact of the Civil Rights Movement and the passing of The Civil Rights Act of 1964, strengthened my parents' stance and perseverance that all their children would graduate from high school. My parents were very adamant about their children attending school and receiving an education. It was a rule almost etched in stone that you were expected to follow. I clearly understood that I would attend school, listen intently to my teachers, and aim at reaching my highest potential. My parents' passion for education and their persistence was one of the motivating factors that led me to become an educator.

It is the purpose of this paper to reflect on the principal's role in the following areas: (a) creating a safe, caring environment for students; (b) assisting teachers in

creating a learning environment; (c) engaging parents in their child's education; and (d) developing a learning community as an educational leader. It is my intent to examine the characteristics of these roles through my philosophy and educational experiences thus envisioning an environment that will ensure these efforts.

Philosophy

As we approach the 21st century, education should be a top priority in everyone's life. Schools must focus on educating all students from the brightest to the mentally challenged. Schools are faced with many challenges and more opportunities than ever before. Planning for the 21st century will take a collaborative effort on the part of leaders, teachers, parents, students, and the community. We, as stakeholders, must make a commitment to these challenges and opportunities by fulfilling specific roles when educating students. As a team, we must 'buy into' and take ownership of the educational networkings in our community. We must combine our thoughts, ideas, and resources toward the same goals if educational achievement is to occur.

The task of educating children has many obstacles and missions. In the past, students were prepared to work in an

industrial age with emphasis on basic skills, developing a strong work ethic, and graduating from high school. However, today's educational reforms must include an educational system that prepares and educates students for the global economy with emphasis on lifelong learning and success in the information age.

Learners must now be able to change and adapt to a rapidly changing world, determine relevant information from the massive amount available, possess interpersonal skills, be adept at learning about new technologies, and be more self directed than in the past. (Sherritt & Basom, 1996, p. 288)

Educators who will implement these reforms must develop a comprehensive plan for educating students. These plans must include administrators who will ensure that these challenges are met while envisioning new ones, and teachers who are willing to implement these challenges in their classrooms. These teachers must be aware of the different modes of learning styles of all students from the talented and gifted to the inclusion of the mentally challenged. Since some students come to school ill-prepared, carrying extra baggage, and possessing feelings of not fitting in, educators must be pliable to these sensitive circumstances and willing to "go

that extra mile” for students who don’t fit the category of an orthodoxed student. These students are pining for attention, understanding, and just needing someone who will listen. Do educators overlook those needs, and continue with that day’s curriculum? This issue is discussed further in a term called “in loco parentis.” As noted by (Alexander & Alexander, 1992), “the courts have never intended that school authorities or teachers stand fully in the place of parents in control of their children. School officials’ and teachers’ prerogatives are circumscribed by and limited to school functions and activities; ” (p. 282) however, “the boundaries of the teacher’s authority is marked by requirements of reasonableness and restraint” (p. 282). I believe that educators must insure that the needs of all students are being met by providing them with the best experiences and resources to ensure success. I believe a court in Nebraska defined these needs as “wholesome influences” (Richardson v. Braham, 1933).

Educators must be caring, committed, and have the best interest of students at heart. Students should never be subjected to alienation, or hold feelings of being a loser because the curriculum needs of the school must be met.

“Some students who are unsuccessful academically and who receive insufficient positive attention from peers and adults start to act as though they were quietly invisible” (Testerman, 1996, p. 364). Schools have become extended families taking on the role of parenting for some students who are missing out on the nurturing skills that supportive parents provide.

Past learning and teaching practices must become more than a solo act aimed at individual achievement. Schools must provide instruction that is relevant to students by making connections to future opportunities and endeavors. These endeavors must include schools and businesses forming partnerships. Together, they would provide vocational skills and on the job training to students to address those who would otherwise leave without going on to postsecondary education. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1993, provided a solution to this growing problem. It facilitates students in attaining a postsecondary education, on the job training, and a job after high school. During the crux of the school day, the school’s curriculum would focus on the skills students need to do these various jobs, and allow students to work in their communities during the remaining part of the school day.

Students pursuing a postsecondary education also would benefit from these programs. They would experience real-world connections to future opportunities, possibly secure permanent jobs, and enhance their self esteem. Some employers provide financial assistance to employees who want to attend college. These programs give purpose to students by connecting classroom learning to the workplace, empower leadership skills, and cultivate a strong work ethic.

Partnerships and school-to-work initiatives are valuable resources for promoting the school, incorporating community involvement, training on the job, and defraying financial hardships on limited school budgets.

Creating a Safe, Caring Environment for Students

New reforms must address the social, physical, and emotional problems that hinder students from reaching academic achievement. Today's students are lacking parental and self discipline, experimenting with drugs and sex, being subjected constantly to abusive situations, and missing family support and supervision. "We are bombarded with news of alarming increases in measure of dysfunctions and ill health among youth and their families: unemployment, unwanted

pregnancies, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence” (Reyes, Wagstaff, & Fusarelli, 1999, p. 186). These problems eventually overshadow students’ self-esteem, their ability to think academically, thus ending their commitment to education. Students begin seeking other activities that will compensate for their failure in school. These activities usually end with devastating consequences, or students becoming clients in the juvenile court services. These activities may include selling or using drugs, joining gangs, committing crimes, or the ultimate ‘cop out,’ committing suicide.

Schools can no longer exist as “islands of safety in a sea of community turmoil,” according to Ernest Boyer (as cited in Houston, 1998, p. 2). Programs must be in place, so students can view school as a place to receive help and solutions to their problems. Students must be provided safe havens, and educators who are willing to advise and listen. In essence, students are wanting and needing Maslow’s hierarchy of needs-- food, shelter, and security. These basic needs must be in place before “educational and spiritual growth” (Coleman & Glaros, 1983, p. 127) can occur. As educators, how can we

separate the act of learning from these basic needs? Bob McCarthy wrote that “the love of learning is an acquired taste, an addiction for the tart rather than the sweet” (Peters & Austin, 1986, p. 480). Educators have the ability to make a difference in students’ lives. These differences must include focusing on the entire student not just their academic abilities but their emotional and physical well being.

If we do not pay more attention to young people’s social, physical, emotional, and moral development throughout early childhood and all the years of schooling, we may end up with adults who are wonderful computer operators but unbalanced human beings. (Howe, 1993, p. 227)

Educators must be proactive and provide support to these students before their problems magnify, and finding solutions come too late. We must begin teaching cognitive skills and courses that relate to real-life experiences that will teach students how to handle problems as they occur.

I would begin this process by investigating the possibilities of adding courses to the curriculum that concentrate on cognitive skills. Next, I would communicate with experts concerning the benefits of implementing a program at the high school level, and if these skills should be

addressed earlier at the elementary or middle school level?

If students can learn the slogan, "Just Say No" at an early age, what would prevent them from learning cognitive skills that will assist them?

As the building administrator, how will I ensure that students have a safe and caring school? School and board policies will be enforced and implemented at all times. All classroom teachers will provide students with classroom management plans that specify procedures and expectations for classes. Parents will be informed about these policies and encouraged to discuss them with their children in an effort to help promote and maintain a safe environment. Parents will be encouraged to contact the school for clarification on any of the policies or procedures.

A zero tolerance policy will be in place and acted upon for serious violations along with proactive measures to deter inappropriate behaviors. These measures would include surveillance cameras located inside and outside the school, parking lot and hall monitors patrolling the hallways and parking lots, a School Resource Officer assigned to the building, and teachers present during the changing of classes.

During inservice week prior to school starting, the entire staff would receive training on crisis and emergency procedures, and operational safety. A safety team would be created and staffed with various people from outside agencies. These agencies would include the local clergy, human and social service agencies, law enforcement, and counselors.

Assisting Teachers in Creating a Learning Environment

Effective teaching is one of the key elements in the education process. Teachers begin this process by promoting a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. The classroom must be a place where all students can share, differ, comprehend, and still be respected.

In order to get students to focus on learning, teachers must implement various teaching strategies that attract and hold their attention. Implementing various strategies, prevent classrooms from becoming boring and redundant.

Teachers must become actors that come alive by delivering instruction in an interesting and captivating manner. Teachers must adapt instruction to fit the needs of all students rather than following a plan that only is focused on one type of learner.

As an experienced educator, I am able to identify frowns or facial expressions as indicators that a concept, or an explanation has not been understood by one or more students. At this point, my initial style of teaching is changed to one that will parallel with their individual styles of learning.

“Most children can master the same content; how they master it is determined by their individual styles ” (Dunn, Beaudry, Klavas, 1989, p. 56) of learning. Individual styles of learning promote motivation and the desire to be successful. “It’s about acknowledging that each person has different gifts, strengths, and concerns and then finding a way to utilize them” (Lieberman, Falk, & Alexander, 1995, p. 120).

As the building administrator, how will I assist teachers in maintaining an effective learning environment? Together, teachers and I will evaluate the current learning environment and then determine what should be changed or improved. Teachers will assess and reflect on their curriculum and classroom instruction and make decisions based on that assessment. I will set aside time for teachers to collaborate together on various learning styles and teaching strategies to use in their classrooms. Resource material will be provided

relating to current research and best practices in specific areas. Maintain lines of communication with internal departments and outside agencies for students who may need additional assistance.

Posted on my classroom door is a poster that reads: "Today's Preparation Determines Tomorrow's Achievements." This poster reminds students to plan, organize, and work hard to reach their full academic potential, which will result in a promising future.

Engaging Parents in Their Child's Education

Past administrative practices have isolated parents and the community from schools. As noted by Tyack (1993), "bureaucratic arteriosclerosis, insulation from parents and patrons... thus buffering of the school from the environment, especially from parents and community members" (p. 3) has caused this isolation. Such isolation has caused parents and the community to view schools in a negative manner and widen the gap of working for the benefit of students.

Schools can no longer act as separate entities within the crux of any given community. They must promote and encourage parental involvement in the process of educating

their children. Schools must make a stronger commitment to “bring together the home/family and school in a concerted effort to enhance the quality of education” (Hinojosa, 1990, p. 81). Parental involvement puts new emphasis on education and adds new meaning to the term learning. When parents are involved in their children's' education, they “become strong advocates of change and help school personnel inform the larger community” (Glickman, 1993, p. 105).

Parents must teach their children at an early age the value of an education and become stakeholders in the educating process. They must be visible, supportive, and lead in this process of educating. When parents have met these incentives, a commitment is made to their children and education.

An article in the NEA Today listed 5 strategies for getting parents involved in schools: (a) meet parents on their turf; (b) make schools parent friendly; (c) bridge the language gap; (d) involve parents in decision making; and (e) help parents help their children (Gutloff, 1997). These strategies will build an alliance between parents and school.

Some parents who are involved in schools possess a unique talent that they are willing to share to enhance the

school their children attend. Cathy Freericks (as cited by Leader's Edge, 1998) identifies six roles parents like to play in schools. They include: (a) change agent, a strong "advocate" for students; (b) communicator, a "networker" who informs other parents about happenings at school; (c) tutor, "semi-professional teacher" who likes tutoring small groups of kids; (d) program coordinator, "activities director" who can put programs together for schools in the entire district; (e) front-line assistant, a "guy/girl friday" who likes hands-on activities; and (f) community liaison, who has the "knack" for finding outside resources that meet school and student needs. These roles that I believe inspire parental involvement and new ideas to the school. My focus will be on creating involvement that utilizes these roles.

The Role of Educational Leaders

Educational leaders in the 21st century must begin to examine, analyze, and reevaluate their education programs. They must develop a comprehensive plan for their entire building and time frames for each implementation. As the educational leader, I know that implementing new changes will take time, and people must be able to respond, react,

and in some cases grieve. According to Bridges (1991), the reason “organizational changes fail is that no one thought about endings or planned to manage their impact on people” (p. 32). Changes bring new ideas into the learning community in an effort to provide students with a better education.

Instructional leaders facilitate instruction through staff inservices and training sessions, assist teachers in developing a diverse curriculum, support the implementation of curriculum with resources such as money and personnel time, encourage professional leave days, provide research on topics pertinent to their school’s mission, allowing teachers to observe other teachers, and evaluate teachers. Facilitating Instruction through these methods preserves a collegial working environment, generates trust among stakeholders, and expands the school’s knowledge base that will benefit the entire learning community.

Today’s leadership must encompass a different leader than before. “Changing our metaphors is an important prerequisite for developing a new theory of management and a new leadership practice” (Sergiovanni, 1991, p. 68).

Leadership is multidirectional with leaders possessing the

ability to focus on the future along with the vision, goals, and beliefs of their school. Leaders can no longer take a back seat, nor work within the traditional style of leading. "Leadership is an influenced relationship designed to create mutually agreed upon and socially valued goals that help an organization stretch to a higher level" (Patterson, 1997, p. 5).

Leaders must develop rapport with individuals for the mission of a better school. This rapport is developed by working with staff to maintain the climate and the culture of the learning community, and decisions are made based on understanding the whole picture not just parts. Leaders remain positive and continue to focus on the school's vision while developing professional relationships with subordinates who are resistant to change.

Leaders focus on educating and molding students into productive and career-minded individuals for future successes. They are at the core of their schools to ensure that students assimilate verbal and social skills to prepare them for the global community. To complete this task they involve state legislators and local entities such as central administration, school boards, teachers, parents, and the community.

Leaders are risk-takers that stand beside their staff and students, questioning theories, and rejecting the status quo. Their leadership style must encourage responsibility, autonomy among the staff and students, and be determined by what they value and believe. They have the ability to be fair and consistent with their staff and students while building credibility and trust.

Leaders initiate dialogue sessions with parents, implement advisory committees that includes parents, teachers, and students, and provide an open door policy. These initiatives give administrators further insight into the climate and culture in their buildings, create a network for improving their schools, and allow all stakeholders to take ownership in creating a learning community.

Summary

During my teaching career, I have worked with many administrators with various leadership styles. Through continuing my education and research, I am able to recognize these styles and the merits of each one of them. Their leadership style reflected their beliefs about leadership that in turn affected the school environment. Those who operated

by “maintaining firm hierarchical control of authority and close supervision of those in the lower ranks” (Owens, 1998, p. 39), took from us our right to free will and self determination. They placed themselves in a superior position above us to maintain their position of superiority. This leadership style left individuals and our school feeling useless and threatened, thus creating a hostile organization.

Those who operated by including our strengths and talents, guided our mission, and recognized our abilities to lead. They were good leaders exhibiting excellent leadership styles. According to Owens (1998), these leaders operated from an “open systems model” (p. 43). They empowered teachers by working along side them communicating incentives that encouraged and motivated. The organization was conducive to learning because the mission and goals were clear, and the administration and teachers complemented each other. This left everyone feeling connected to the organization. Students saw a team working together to improve their education, and as a valuable commodity to invest in for the future.

During my leadership training at the University of Northern Iowa, I was given the opportunity to serve as an assistant principal at the school where I teach. There was one particular incident that I will always remember. I had assumed my place in the school's cafeteria along with the regular administrators and supervising teachers. I noticed that one of the supervising teachers had not arrived. About 15 minutes into the lunch shift, the teacher arrived and immediately went to talk to one of the regular administrators. After an exchange of sharp words and elevating voices, the teacher walked away. I later learned that the teacher had been talking with a student about a suicidal attempt. However, the administrator told the teacher there was no excuse for being late, and he was expected to be on time!

What would have happened to this student if the teacher had not taken the time to listen, show concern, and take this student to his counselor? Do we stop providing our services at the cafeteria doors? Is supervision more important than a human life? Is caring and being concerned only allowed in the classrooms? Is this the kind of administrator I want leading my child's school? No! Administering to students must happen

anywhere at anytime. Students are entrusted to us on a daily basis to provide instruction and skills, but how do we exclude the other? Who among us would turn a deaf ear? This experience strengthened my belief that students must come first in any given situation. We have an obligation to make their educational experience the best by nurturing and assisting them along the way. As an educator, I will remember this incident when a student says, "Mrs. Campbell, I need to talk to you." This will be my signal that they may need help, clarification, or just directions to the cafeteria.

As a leader, I will rely on my determination and passion for students to make decisions in their best interest. I will remember that most people are not afraid to change; it is when the change is forced upon them that they resist. The following excerpt sums up our mission as educators and the end result I am seeking!

The aim of education is not merely to make parents, or citizens, or workers, or indeed to surpass the Russians or the Japanese, but ultimately to make human beings who will live life to the fullest, who will continually add to the quality and the meaning of their experience and to their ability to direct that experience, and who will participate actively with their fellow human beings in the building of a good society. (Cremin, 1990, p.125)

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